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ABSTRACT

The process of getting a thought out of the mind and onto paper can be divided into five major categories: (1) discovering the word, (2) excavating the mythic word from the subconscious, (3) perceiving the word in the conscious, (4) verbalizing the expressed word, and (5) comprehending the unsaid word. When humans experience anything, their minds figuratively store the entire experience and submerge that into the depths of the unconscious. To recall the word, or metaphor, representing that experience, the mind must draw upon the mythic word, which acts as a model for understanding meaning. Once given meaning and significance through the mythic word, the metaphor is able to be perceived and understood by the writer. The expressed word is merely a metaphor for the perceived word--it gives the reader a direction as to how the writer's perceptions of the word "should feel" to the reader. The revision process is representative of the unsaid word; it is not what is said but what is meant that leads to comprehension. In terms of the classroom, freewriting exercises can help students discover the metaphorical word through excavating their individual mythologies. (HOD)

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How Johnny/Jane Writes: The Complex Word

Rodney D. Keller

Thinking is overwhelming. Writing is horrifying. Both thinking and writing are basically the same process. No wonder students and teachers immediately gasp with pain whenever a blank page is before them. I tell my students that writing is thinking and writing is hard because thinking is hard. Writing is not just sitting down with pencil in hand and pouring out lines and lines of stupendous or even muddled thought. There's work, real work, involved. If thinking is such an inseparable part of writing, how do teachers get students to think so they can write? What is the writing/thinking process? I have divided the process of getting a thought and the written word out of the mind and onto paper into five major categories: 1) discovering the word, 2)excavating the mythic word from the subconscious, 3) perceiving the word in the conscious, 4) verbalizing the expressed word, and 5) comprehending the unsaid word.

The Word

First is discovering the word. The word is basic to both thought and writing. Therefore, it is necessary to understand what the word actually is. The word is a metaphor. But what does the word metaphorically represent? The word is a metaphor for both language and style. Before examining how the word is a metaphor, it is helpful to understand the differences between language and style. Language, according to Roland Barthes, is not just the lexicon or words, but is also the syntax, the paradigms, the

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rhetoric.[1] Language, therefore, is everything that writers use to express their perceptions of the world. Perhaps language is also analogous to the tools writers use as they write. These tools consist of more than vocabulary, more than mechanics, and more than usage but also consist of writers' experiences, their cultural backgrounds, their outlooks, and their environments. Language becomes writers' tools.

Style,on the other hand, is how writers use the tools of the language to order their thoughts. Susan Sontag summarizes Jean-Paul Sartre's distinction between language and style by saying, "Language is the collective inventory, what is given to the writer; style is what is chosen, the 'how' one renders 'what one wants to write about.'"[2] The writers' subjective choice, then, is style. When writers choose from their subject matter and decide on which elements of the language they will use to order that subject, they discover that the language fails to express their perceptions, and they seek a remedy. The remedy is to describe the subject as accurately as possible, yet the description is only metaphorical compared with the actual subject. No matter what writers attempt, and no matter how they order language, they can only express their ideas metaphorically, which leads Barthes to declare that "style is never anything but metaphor."[3]

Style also differs from language in that language is horizontal, according to Barthes, and style is vertical. Language is horizontal because its meaning is at a literal, unambiguous level, but style, or metaphor, is vertical because its ambiguous meanings comprise various strata. The point at which the horizontal language meets the vertical style is called "writing" or "the word."[4] The word, then, is a metaphor for both style and language because it represents both. The word is a

combination of both language and style. Perhaps an example will help. One night my wife Christi and I lay awake trying to recall a word. The longer we worried over the word, trying to make some association, the more awake we became. The process our minds struggled with is the thinking/writing process, and the first step is discovering the word. To illustrate how the word is a metaphor for both language and style we need to first make an association. We knew the unambiguous, dennotative meaning (or language) was that of a window over a door for ventialtion, but the word was still submerged in our unconscious. To help revive the word we began to recall incidents when we saw or heard of these windows above doors. For instance, we remembered some ganster movies of the 40's when the window was used for eavesdropping, or a Lucille Ball comedy routine where she would crawl through the window above the door to get into mischief, or remembered my grandmother explain that the first thing to go in their home when they remodeled in 1939 was the window above the door. Those associations plus others are style in that they are <u>how</u> the language is ordered or used to convey meaning. When the denotative meaning or language of a window over the door is combined with the connotative meaning or style of ventilation, eavesdropping, mischief, or an unsightly annoyance, then the mind recalls the word <u>transom</u>. <u>Transom</u> is a metaphor for both language and style.

The creation of this metaphor "word," or in this case <u>transom</u>, takes place in the subconscious. It is hidden and buried in the depths, and students need to pull that created word out. The excavating of that word or metaphor out of the mind is the thinking/writing process. Recorded in the subconscious are all of the experiences that individuals have. The

mind records everything, all of the sensuous experiences of taste, smell, sound, touch and sight. When we experience anything, our minds figuratively store/photograph/record/take a motion picture of the entire experience and submerge that into the depths of the unconscious and categorize those experiences so that hopefully they can be recalled when necessary, but the recalling process makes writing and thinking difficult. Remember we lay awake thinking of transom. What the mind needs to do is recall the word that represents that experience. But for all practical purposes, writers do not have access to that word because it is so embedded in the unconscious.

The Mythic Word

The only way to get access to that word which is a metaphor of the experience is through the mythic word. This mythic word is not the literal, horizontal word (language) nor is it the figurative, vertical word (style), but it is much deeper. It is the word of the unconscious I call the mythic word. The mythic word is a sub-language and a sub-style, yet it permeates significantly both of these and is manifest in the written word. Jean-Paul Sartre belives that writers are "liberators"[5] and "revealers,"[6] or as Susan Sontag says of Sartre, "Writer[s] are potentially giver[s] of consciousness."[7] Writers take the submerged, unconscious world to the surface through metaphorical comparisons with the conscious world. This comparison of two worlds is essential to understanding and is integral with writers. In fact, Barthes insists that writers' styles are writers' mythologies. Barthes says, "Thus under the name of style a self-sufficient language is evolved which has its roots only in the depth of the author's personal and secret mythology, that subnature of expression where the first

coition of words and things takes place, where once and for all the great verbal themes of his existence come to be installed."[8] Barthes states here that the authors' styles are an expression of their individual mythologies, and this in turn is expressed through the written word. Barthes again emphasizes the word coition, and the style becomes increasingly more central in literature because it reveals not only how writers organize their thoughts, but also metaphorically compares the unfamiliar unconscious with the familiar conscious, and this troping leads to an understanding of the once unknown. The myth becomes a metaphor for the conscious, and the writer becomes as Sartre says "a giver of consciousness."[9]

These mythologies do not in and of themselves offer definitive meanings to words but offer directions for understanding. This understanding or direction clarifies and defines meanings. Hayden White clarifies this concept by saying that literary narratives are not, in a sense, a fictional account of some supposed event, but a reproduction of an actual event which occurs within writers' minds, and this event becomes a "complex of symbols" or an "icon," providing meaning and order out of writers' "words."[10] Northrup Frye also says that "while we read, we are aware of a sequence of metaphorical identifications; when we have finished, we are aware of an organizing structural pattern or conceptualized myth,"[11] and Susan Sontag says, "Myths are not descriptions but rather models for description (or thinking). . . ."[12] The mythic word, then, does not intrinsically convey meaning, but it provides a model by which the word can be understood and meaning can be conveyed.

Writers' mythologies, although they are individual, are also universal. It's this universality of mythic understanding that gives the word meaning

and significance. In short, the mythic word is the union of the writers' use of language and the writers' styles which is metaphorical for their individual mythologies. This union provides meaning and understanding for the word because writers' individual mythologies result from the archetypal mythology universal to all--or the mythic word.

Now, back to the example of the transom. The mythic association with the transom is a universal association. The association is not with the word transom but with the concept of idea of transom--the idea is mythic. For example, the only time I ever, at least knowingly, remember actually seeing windows above doors was in the non-English speaking country of Finland. I frequently saw those windows in the older homes, and when I asked what they were called, I was told they were poikkiparrut. I had no idea what the English word was, and I had no need to know. Poikkiparrut are windows above doors. The mythic word, then, is the concept of windows above doors not necessarily with any direct association with a particular word or language. It's the universal association which any culture sharing the concept has. It is the mythic word.

The Perceived Word

Once the mythic word gives meaning and significance to the word, writers are able to perceive that word; they're able to understand that word and feel what they are going to write about--the word is in their consciousness. It hasn't been vocalized or even verbalized in the mind yet; however, the words are floating around waiting for expression. The perceived word is important because it is still close to the unconscious, and it is a fairly good representation of the mythic or subconscious word that is seeking revelation. Remember the unconscious word is the actual

photograph of the memory; it is accurate, and when the mythic word adds meaning to the unconscious word, the universality of the unconscious word is somewhat modified to meet the demands of the universality. Each step away from the unconscious modifies the word and becomes less pure in the sense of its original situation, but the additional meanings add significance and understanding to the word. The perceived word then is important because it is only one step removed from the unconscious memory. If writers understand the perceived word so well and their perceptions are so strong that they are able to express their perceptions as accurately as possible, then their representations will be more precise. However, writers are usually uncertain of their perceptions, and when they try to express those perceptions, their expressions may not be all that concrete. I experience abstract perceptions when I know what I want to say, but the thoughts are still vague, and the only way I can get those ideas down is by writing them, in hopes that my perceptions will sharpen and I will be able to express myself more accurately.

In terms of the transom, the more my wife and I discussed our associations with the mythic or universal concept of windows above doors, the more concrete our perceptions and examples became. We were able to envision instances when transoms became topics of interest as in gangster movies, Lucille Ball reruns, or in my grandmother's house. The unconscious association with the word was emerging more directly and concretely to the surface of the conscious--we perceived the word in our minds. At first we associated or recalled the first few sounds of tra, tran, trans, then experimented with concluding sounds until we stumbled upon one that fit, and our minds registered the positive association, and

we knew that we had it. Transom. Perceptions are incredibly important to a writer. They lead to the expressed word. A teacher needs to teach the students how to cultivate those perceptions, which are a surfacing of the mythic word into the conscious, and I usually do this through free-writing exercises.

The Expressed Word

The word is now a culmination and combination of language, style, the mythic word, and the perceived word, each adding significance and meaning to the word. This meaning and significance is ready to become a more central element of writing/thinking when it becomes the expressed word. Writers sense the need to communicate their mythic consciousness, but they soon realize that somewhere between their perceptions of the word and the expression of the word, some meaning is lost. It is similar to the loss that occurs when a manuscript is translated from one language into another language; the words may convey the same literal meaning, but the metaphoric thoughts of writers which express their mythic perceptions will be altered because, as Levi-Strauss indicates, the mythology is in the language itself.[13] Although the mythologies are universal, the perceptions of the mythologies differ from language to language, from culture to culture, and from individual to individual. Just as the translators must rely on their perceptions of the writer's expression and express that perception as accurately as possible, writers must rely on their own perceptions of the word (language, style, mythic, and perceived) and express that perception. But writers must realize that an absolutely accurate expression is not possible. A reason an accurate expression is not possible is writers must use metaphors to express their perceptions, and as Hayden White explains: "The metaphor does not image the thing it seeks to charac-

terize, it gives directions for finding the set of images that are intended to be associated with that thing. It functions as a symbol, rather than as a sign; which is to say that it does not give us either a description or an icon of the thing it represents, but tells us what images to look for in our culturally encoded experience in order to determine how we should feel about the thing represented."[14] The metaphor which writers choose to express their perceptions of the word does not necessarily tell how writers feel or "image" what they mean, but the metaphor should give the reader a direction or guidance as to how writers' perceptions of the word "should feel" to the reader. So the expressed word is a metpahor for the perceived word.

My perceptions of the transom were slightly altered when I tried to express them to my students on the next day. They had no idea what the word was or even what the concept was. I wrote transom on the board and got no response. I then drew a door with a window above it which only raised the question "Why have a window there when you can't see out or in?" I had to explain the concept by giving examples from my experiences. But the students were not able to understand as completely as I wanted because of their lack of experience and lack of language. My expressed word needed translation and some meaning was lost. Hopefully I provided the concept or "icon" of transom to the students, and they can now start their own associations.

The Unsaid Word

Now that writers have their own expressions on paper through the written word, they begin to revise so that they can help clarify any of the gaps their perceptions and lack of vocabulary have established. This is the painful process of writing where writers are aware more fully than perhaps

before of what they were trying to say, whether or not they said it. This is the stage I call the unsaid word. It is not the written word that is of concern here but what the writers did not say but meant that leads to comprehension. Michel Foucault in The Archaeology of Knowledge emphasizes that what is not said is equally important and significant as what is said.[15] Sartre also hints at the imporatnace of the not-said when he says, "This silence is a moment of language; being silent is not being dumb; it is to refuse to speak, and therefore to keep on speaking."[16] The "not-said" is essential to comprehension as the "already-said." To comprehend is to understand both the not-said and the already-said of writing. So whenever I write or use the word transom, I am also using all of my associations with that word including old homes in Finland, 40's movies, tv reruns, my grandmother, my night lying awake thinking of the word with my wife, and my explaining of the word to my students. The word transom means more now than a window above a door, yet I merely write transom--the rest is left unsaid, but it is there, and it adds meaning to the word. Therefore, the unsaid word is as important to writing as the said word.

Now, in terms of the classroom, I teach this thinking/writing process in conjunction with voice. To get voice in a paper, writers must discover the metaphorical word through excavating their individual mythologies until those mythologies surface as the perceived word in the subconscious and are then verbalized as the expressed word while conveying the understanding of the unsaid word. The students can do this by various freewriting exercises. When they become more concerned with what they say than how correctly and mechanically flawless they said it, then they discover how thinking and writing mesh. One student example demonstrates the power

of writing that involves the thinking/writing process. Steve is free-writing to me a letter concerning his brother's death. This is unedited: "I've always felt I was pretty insular in regard to death; indeed the deaths of my grandparents (with whom I was very close) and the two best friends of my childhood were rather philosophic losses for me. Mitch's death, however, hit at my soul's solar plexus. I figured that the pain was to be like that of a physical wound--slowly healing until only an uncomfortable scar remained to ache when I strained it unduly. I'm finding it more like the pain of arthritis: flaring and remitting, sometimes coming with an intensity like the original pain." Steve has discovered the metaphoric words to describe the angusih of his mythology concerning death and has expressed his perceptions so the reader also perceives more of what Steve understands than what he has said. He has incorporated writing and thinking.

Teachers, then, must help students to realize that writing is a complicated process in which, step by step, they must think, and that thinking itself is a process. Both teachers and students desire expression without fully understanding how to express themselves,and once that expression is expressed, it is not accurate. Let the student know of the frustrations involved in writing--that it is not easy, but let them also know that through the writing, the subconscious becomes more conscious, and they are able to understand themselves better through the word, the mythic word, the perceived word, the expressed word, and the unsaid word. The word makes writing and thinking a difficult process, but a meaningful one.

NOTES

[1]Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p. 9.

[2]Susan Sontag, Preface, Writing Degree Zero, by Roland Barthes, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p. xii.

[3]Barthes, p. xiii.

[4]Barthes, p. 9

[5]Jean-Paul Sartre, What is Literature?, trans. Barnard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), p. 50.

[6]Sartre, p. 38.

[7]Sontag, p. xi.

[8]Barthes, p. 10.

[9]Sontag, p. xi.

[10]Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 88.

[11]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 352-353.

[12]Sontag, p. xx.

[13]Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 257-258.

[14]White, p. 91.

[15]Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), p. 25.

[16]Sartre, p. 25.

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